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ABSTRACT

The report, developed by a special Iowa task force, examined issues of definition, criteria, and identification procedures for learning disabilities as a point of departure for the examination of current practices affecting learning disabled students in Iowa. The committee's working definintion of learning disabilities is presented as a basis for further discussion. Issues of definition and identification considered include the transition from a conceptual to an operational definition, problems in operationalizing the discrepancy between ability and achievement, problems with tests, objective versus subjective information, differentiation from other influences on learning, the acceptability of learning disabilities, and difficulties with predicting performance. Aspects of the service delivery system discussed are the need for role clarification of regular and special education, the lack of quality pre-referral activities, overemphasis on the identification of learning disabilities at the expense of data interpretation and program development, problems in determining the best environment for a student, and financial considerations. Among seven task force recommendations are: that the state's current rule on learning disabilities not be changed at the present time; that the current procedural manual on the identification of students with learning disabilities be revised; and that special education personnel provide direct assistance to general education staff in serving special needs students within the general education program. (DB)

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ISSUES & RECOMMENDATIONS

A Report Of The Learning Disabilities Task Force On Definition, Criteria And Identification Procedures

State of Iowa
Department of Education
Bureau of Special Education
August, 1986

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INTRODUCTION

In the Spring of 1985, the Bureau of Special Education, Department of Education, initiated a task force to examine the issues of definition, criteria, and identification procedures for learning disabilities, and to present recommendations to the Department regarding these issues. The following report represents the outcome of the group's effort.

The report will be presented to J. Frank Vance, Chief, Bureau of Special Education, Department of Education, to consider in planning future directions and activities in the learning disabilities area. In addition, the report is being presented to a variety of organizations and agencies for response and additional input to the Bureau.

Even though the Task Force was initiated by the Department, the report should not be viewed as an official position of the Department. The Department's position will be evident as plans and activities in the area of learning disabilities are prepared and provided in the coming months. Of course, the Department will make a concerted effort to keep all interested parties and organizations informed of its intentions, plans, and activities.

On behalf of the Department, I thank the Task Force members for their time, energy, expertise, and persistence, and their respective agencies for cooperating and supporting this effort. On behalf of the Task Force, I extend a hearty "thank you" to Teresa Sullivan, secretary, Special Education Division, for typing the many drafts of the report.

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In a relatively short time, the field of learning disabilities has had a major impact on the educational system. Advocates for students with learning disabilities have been instrumental in securing educational rights and improving educational opportunities not only for students with learning disabilities, but for all students requiring special education. The field has helped promote the recognition and acceptance of individual differences in students and the recognition that not all students can or should be taught in the same way.

Despite these contributions, the field is not without controversy. While there is general agreement that there is a population of students who do not fit the more traditional disability or handicap designations and require special education programs in order to succeed academically, the question, "Who are the students with learning disabilities?", continues to be debated. A general consensus regarding the conceptual definition of learning disabilities exists, but there is little agreement as to the translation of this conceptual definition into an operational definition that specifically identifies students who are learning disabled and require special services beyond the basic education program provided all students. Because of these difficulties and the desire of educators to help all students who have academic difficulties, the numbers of students identified as learning disabled and requiring special services beyond the basic educational program has continued to increase. This increase has led to a serious strain on limited financial resources, providing what may prove to be the most compelling reason to reexamine current practices.

Dawson (1985) has stated that the professional dilemma facing the field of learning disabilities "is how to get from where we are to where

we ought to be." This paper represents some initial steps in dealing with this dilemma. First, to provide a common point of reference, the condition referred to by the term learning disabilities is described. Then, issues relating to definition, identification, and service delivery are presented. Discussion of these issues is intended to serve as a point of departure for the examination of current practices affecting students with learning disabilities in Iowa and for presenting recommendations for modifying these practices.

DEFINITION

The term "learning disabilities" has been used to identify a group of individuals with learning problems which cannot be attributed to generally low intellectual functioning, physical handicaps, emotional problems, or environmental factors. While numerous definitions have been proposed over the past several decades to describe this group, the field has yet to achieve a specific definition that is universally accepted for theoretical or applied purposes.

The condition referred to by the term learning disabilities is described by this committee as follows:

(1) "Learning disabilities" refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders that are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to some type of central nervous system dysfunction.

(2) Throughout life, learning disabilities selectively interfere with the acquisition, processing, retrieval, or use and application of information, vary in degree of severity, and affect such functions as attention, memory, perception, language, and reasoning.

(3) Characteristic of learning disabilities are noticeable strengths and weaknesses in learning and a significant difference between actual and predicted performance.

(4) Although learning disabilities may occur along with other handicapping conditions (e.g., sensory impairment, mental retardation, behavior disorders) or environmental influences (e.g., cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction, poor school attendance), the presenting problems are not solely the result of those conditions or influences.

ISSUES

Definition and Identification

Transition From a Conceptual to an Operational Definition

For ultimate effectiveness in accurately identifying members of a group, the defining factors of that group must be universal to all members of the group and specific to only members of that group. Furthermore, to identify members of a group on a large scale basis, the defining factors must be easily and accurately identifiable.

Learning disabilities is a concept that has limited universally accepted theoretical or empirical explanation. The field's present technology and level of knowledge severely limit the ability to define accurately concepts such as "processing disorders", "abilities", "intelligence", and "attention". Consequently, it is difficult today to devise reliable means for differentiating individuals with learning disabilities from those who have similar learning difficulties for other reasons.

Students receiving service in one district, therefore, can be very different from those receiving services in another district. Even where operational criteria are established, as in Iowa, interpretation of the criteria may lead to differences in identification.

Discrepancy

A key issue in the problem of identifying individuals with learning disabilities is the notion of "severe/significant/substantial discrepancy" between ability and achievement. The idea of "discrepancy" seems to be a major factor differentiating learning disabilities from other handicapping

conditions. Yet it is perhaps the most problem-laden aspect of translating a conceptual definition into operational eligibility criteria. Attempts to quantify significant discrepancy have led to a multitude of generally unsatisfactory eligibility criteria.

Tests

Tests used to assess students have serious problems in terms of validity, reliability, and norms.

** Validity. A test is valid when it measures what it is intended to measure. Validity of a test must be questioned when the concept it is measuring is vaguely or inconsistently defined.

** Reliability. Reliability is related to accuracy of the measurement properties of a test. Differences in scores should be due to differences in the person or persons taking the test, not to internal characteristics of the test or to characteristics of the testgiver. Many tests currently in use do not have high reliabilities. Since individuals with learning disabilities perform inconsistently, it is even more difficult to assess accurately skill levels on the basis of standardized tests.

** Norms. If an individual's performance is to be compared to the performance of others, and if assumptions of deviation from "average performance" are to be made, those who interpret the test must know to whom the individual's performance is being compared and whether the comparison group is relevant. Many of the measures currently in use are inadequately normed or may be normed on a population not relevant to the individual being tested.

Objective Versus Subjective Information

Objective, data-based criteria for identifying individuals with learning disabilities have the advantage of providing some measure of consistency. However, objective criteria applied to a subjective concept will inevitably lead to misclassifications due to their relative inflexibility. While subjective criteria are more flexible and adaptable to the identification of learning disabilities, the lack of consistency inherent in subjectivity can also lead to misclassification. With

subjective criteria, the decision-making process becomes much more complex and with complexity comes greater potential for error.

Differentiation From Other Influences on Learning

Many of the characteristics of learning disabilities are similar to characteristics of other handicapping conditions or problems due to emotional or environmental influences. It frequently is difficult, if not impossible in some circumstances, to sort out the cause of these characteristics. There is under such circumstances the ethical issue of denial of services on the basis of what may be arbitrary eligibility criteria.

Acceptability of Learning Disabilities

Identifying an individual as learning disabled can be beneficial in that it allows special services to be provided which may help the individual learn more effectively. It also provides an "explanation" for the student's problems which can be helpful to the student, parents, and teachers. However, a diagnosis of learning disabilities can also lead to negative expectations on the part of the individual and teachers, and the possible provision of an inappropriate educational program.

The perceived acceptability of learning disabilities by some individuals in comparison to other handicapping conditions, such as mental disabilities or behavior disorders, has played a role in the increasing numbers and kinds of students so identified. If a student can be identified as learning disabled rather than mentally disabled or behavior disordered, the learning disabled option may be chosen even if another disability designation appears more appropriate.

On the other hand, because of the continuing controversy over what constitutes learning disabilities, some individuals view the concept as vague and questionable, and with a degree of cynicism. Such attitudes can adversely affect identification procedures and educational services as well.

Predicted Performance

The issue of predicted performance is central to most LD definitions and identification procedures. Many individuals equate predicted performance with intelligence. Yet, intelligence itself is not a clearly defined concept, only being defined in a practical sense by the tests that purport to measure it. Many of the processes believed to be involved in learning disabilities are part of, or related to, the input and output factors measured by intelligence tests. Therefore, while the intelligence test is generally used as a means of estimating the "potential ability" of a student against which deficits are compared, the deficits themselves may affect the accuracy of this criterion measure.

Service Delivery System

Role Clarification

There is a need to redefine and clarify the roles of regular education and special education personnel with respect to helping students with learning or behavior problems. It is not surprising that there is a large number of referrals to special education when:

** Special education is often the only available alternative alternative for special assistance.

** Regular classroom teachers have been encouraged to refer students with learning problems rather than to individualize instruction.

** The educational system does not encourage or facilitate individualized instruction.

** Special educators encourage referral for evaluation rather than assisting teachers in identifying and implementing potential regular classroom solutions.

** Placement in a special program often signifies the transfer of educational responsibilities to the special education teacher - an important point considering the pressures placed on teachers regarding educational excellence, concern for academic failure, and accountability.

Lack of Quality Pre-referral Activities

Too often referrals are followed immediately by full-scale evaluations. A high percentage of these evaluations result in special education placement. Many local districts are not using existing practices known to be more effective in serving students with academic problems. In practice, pre-referral activities such as clarifying the nature of the problem, validating the referral, generating and monitoring instructional alternatives for the classroom, and developing an assessment plan have not been a part of every potential special education case.

Focus of Efforts

It appears that more time is spent on the identification of learning disabilities than on the interpretation of data, and the development and evaluation of an appropriate program. Too often the question is, "Does this student qualify for special education?," rather than "How can we best meet this student's educational needs?" Generally, special education support staff are only actively involved with students as part of the identification procedure. Support staff involvement with teachers in developing possible classroom-based solutions is limited.

Scheduling, policies, procedures, and financial constraints are all factors which limit consideration of service options. These factors may

limit as well as encourage the identification of students with learning disabilities who require special education.

Best Environment

P.L. 94-142 refers to the "least restrictive environment" which means that any student needing special education services should be placed in an educational setting appropriate to his or her needs and removed only when necessary from the general education program. Yet, the least restrictive environment is often not specifically addressed in making decisions about program alternatives. Regular classroom placement with teacher consultation and student support is a delivery model seldom used. Additional problems also result because of poor coordination between regular education and special education personnel.

Research-Based Support for Program Effectiveness

The effectiveness of special education programming and services has not been substantiated through research. Because of this lack of research-based evidence, it is impossible to attribute student growth to special education programming. In fact, there is some research which suggests that some students with learning disabilities make more progress in an "adapted" regular classroom program than in a special education program.

Financial Consideration

The fact that programs are financed on the basis of the number of students identified limits the flexibility of the system and may even encourage misidentification.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Definition and Identification Procedures

Considering the many issues affecting the identification of students with learning disabilities and recognizing that many of these issues are not immediately resolvable, the Task Force recommends:

1. The state's current rule on learning disabilities not be changed at the present time. This recommendation should not be interpreted to mean that the current rule is the answer to the identification issue and that changes should not be made as alternative directions are proven more appropriate. Rather the recommendation reflects the Task Force position that changes at the present time are not likely to make significant improvements in the identification and programming for students with learning disabilities. This recommendation must be considered in conjunction with the following recommendations.
2. The Special Education Division, Department of Public Instruction, revise the current procedural manual on the identification of students with learning disabilities (The Identification of Pupils with Learning Disabilities, August, 1981, Department of Public Instruction). The focus of this effort would be to:
   a. clarify the interpretation and application of the current rule;
   b. emphasize that the primary purpose of evaluation is to determine an appropriate educational program rather than just qualify a student for existing special education programs;

c. emphasize the use of technically adequate assessment instruments and procedures that provide educationally useful information, and stress the need for each evaluation team member to attend to ethical standards regarding the choice, administration, and interpretation of evaluation procedures;

d. emphasize that the evaluation of any student is indeed a multidisciplinary team effort requiring cooperation and communication among team members;

e. stress the need to approach the multidisciplinary evaluation as a question-oriented, problem-solving effort rather than simply an effort to determine whether a student is or is not eligible for special education;

f. stress the importance for the evaluation team to look beyond test scores and consider the possible reasons for a student's difficulty in learning based on clinical judgment.

3. The Special Education Division, Department of Public Instruction, initiate research efforts that:

a. examine the specific characteristics of the state's current population in an effort to identify the salient variables other than discrepancy criteria that are applicable in identifying students with learning disabilities;

b. explore the viability of alternative identification procedures such a curriculum-based assessment system.

Recognizing that there are students who have educational needs that require services beyond those provided or available through the general education program, and that some, but not all, of these are students with learning disabilities, the Task Force recommends that:

4. Special education support personnel provide direct assistance to general education staff in addressing the special needs of students within the general education program. Such assistance should be viewed as an inherent part of the role of special education support personnel and of the total special education continuum of programs and services. Such a change should not jeopardize the funding of these services. This type of focus should not be viewed as solely the responsibility of special education or general education, but a cooperative effort in responding to student needs that are similar to those of identified handicapped students.

5. A noncategorical approach to serving mildly handicapped students that emphasizes individual student educational needs rather than disability category needs to be adopted. An inordinate amount of personnel time is spent on identifying the categorical disability rather than identifying and developing appropriate educational programs and services for individual students. The Task Force believes this problem also exists in the other disability categories as well and so the recommendation is not solely precipitated by a concern unique to the learning disabilities area.

Given the lack of empirical data regarding programs provided students with learning disabilities, the Task Force recommends that:

6. The Special Education Division, Department of Public Instruction, initiate cooperative research efforts that include college and university personnel, school district personnel, and area education agency personnel in systematically examining program effectiveness. The Task Force would be remiss in failing to note that the concern regarding program effectiveness is a national issue and not one unique to Iowa.

The Task Force believes that the current funding system for special education instructional programs contributes to the identification problem, a problem that is more readily apparent in the learning disabilities area, but certainly a potential problem for the other disability areas as well. The Task Force, therefore, recommends that:

7. The current funding system for special education instructional programs be changed so that the funding for resource teaching programs and possibly special class with integration programs be based on a program unit basis while the funding of self-contained special classes for moderately and severely handicapped students continue to be based on the weighted plan currently in use. In so doing, the state cannot consider such a change as an opportunity to reduce the financial commitment to handicapped students. The change would not reduce the state's financial commitment, but would provide a more manageable method of funding the programs and diminish any potential incentive for identifying students as handicapped in order to support the cost of a program.

CLOSING COMMENT

There can be no argument that there are problems with the current definition of learning disabilities, identification procedures, and service delivery system. The challenge is to learn from past efforts and to make concerted, creative, and systematic efforts to improve the way we identify and serve individuals with learning disabilities, and educate all students. This is not an impossible task. While we may not know the ultimate "solution" now, the knowledge and expertise is available to make significant progress toward a better system. We must be willing to adjust our present way of thinking about regular and special education and devote the resources to accomplish the necessary changes. The fact that there are no easy answers is not a justifiable reason to be satisfied with a familiar, but problem-ridden system. The system has changed tremendously just within the past 10 years and it will continue to change. With planning and innovative thinking, changes can occur that will improve the education system for all students.